

Would You Be a Martyr?

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Many American Christians know that the growth of Christianity in China has been one of the most dramatic stories of Christian revival in the history of the church. Roman Catholic and Protestant Christians numbered just 4 million in 1949, but may, combined, total 80 million today.

Because some people know that I have spent quite a lot of time with China's Christians during the years, they often ask me what has made such growth possible. Could this revival be replicated elsewhere in the world, perhaps even in the United States, they ask?

Over time I have offered various explanations for the Chinese Christian upsurge: the collapse of belief in communism, the corruption and brutality of the ruling regime, the great number of physical healings following prayer by Christians. But it seems to me that these are inadequate.

Of course, God's sovereign blessing is the ultimate explanation. But one quality of Chinese Christians stands out above almost everything else, and that is their willingness over and over again to be martyrs for the Christian faith.

Many Chinese have died under persecution since 1949, especially during the Cultural Revolution of 1966-1976. It may be years before the whole story of China's martyrs becomes available. What we do know is that many Chinese Christians who were not killed were brutally beaten and tortured in prison and were fully ready to become martyrs. They have actually

gone into captivity and brutal mistreatment in prison singing a song, "Lord, let us become martyrs."

This is inexplicable to most Americans. Even we Christians, comfortable in our middle-class, suburban universe—free to worship virtually wherever and whenever we choose—find it very hard to connect with such sentiment.

But the fact is, again and again in Christian history it has been martyrdom and the willingness to accept it that has most advanced the gospel and turned opposition to Christianity into admiration for it. It was the Roman theologian Tertullian (circa 160-229), not himself a martyr, who wrote: "The more often we are mowed down by you [enemies of Christianity], the more we increase in number. The blood of the martyrs is the seed."

It is not just that the sight of brave men and women willing to die for the cause of Christ (and not murdering people in the process, as many Muslims admired in their religion as "martyrs" have done) that moves people to their core. It is that the willingness to give one's life while sharing the gospel is itself a demonstration of phenomenal commitment to Christ and the enlargement of God's kingdom.

It was a survivor of communist persecution in Romania—the late Richard Wurmbrand (1909-2001)—who often said: "What a person really believes is not what he says in his creeds, but what he is willing to die for." Wurmbrand for years refused under torture and threat of execution to deny Christ and lived to champion Christians persecuted under communism everywhere.

But it is not communists alone who have murdered Christians.

Christians even in our own day have been martyred in Pakistan, India, Egypt, Indonesia, Burma, Peru and numerous other countries. In what has become a famous incident, the American missionary Jim Elliott and four fellow Americans were murdered by Auca Indians in Ecuador in 1956. In our own country American high-schoolers Cassie Bernall, Rachel Scott and others were martyred in the Columbine High School shooting spree of 1999.

Since the beginning of Christian history, with the death by stoning of Stephen, martyrs have been with us, and they will surely continue to be until Jesus Christ returns. Of course, only a slight percentage of Christians will ever have to die for their faith.

But the key issue is this: If we are not prepared to die for what we believe, how likely are we to truly live that faith?

Second Timothy 3:12 makes it clear: "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (NIV). Persecution of some kind or other just goes with the territory of being a Christian. If we are not encountering some form of opposition in our faith, are we seriously living it?

Martyrdom always was, and always will be, merely the highest honor of the Christian life.